

1-24-2014

Pattern Repeat

Brendan Miller

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Miller, Brendan, "Pattern Repeat" (2014). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Thesis/Dissertation Collections at RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact ritscholarworks@rit.edu.

Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The College of Imaging Arts and
Sciences School for American Crafts
In Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Pattern Repeat

By: Brendan Miller

1/24/2014

I. Abstract

I am interested in creating work that explores and challenges ideas relating to modern civilization and contemporary culture. I plan on creating both three-dimensional and two-dimensional works in glass and mixed media that use elements of the domestic interior as a reference for our cultural identity. I will continue to develop my visual language through material where traditional decorative techniques in glass and other media can be re-appropriated for metaphoric and conceptual purposes. Through the use of well-developed visual references from the history of decorative media, I will create works that present potentially unsavory subject matter in an attractive and palatable manner. The culmination of my research will be the creation of beautiful and seductive objects, images, and installations that create instances of irony and satire.

II. Introduction

Elements of the domestic interior reference our cultural identity both past and present. In the past, decoration and craftsmanship were common qualities within everyday items. The objects I have created relate to this recent past, where handmade qualities were present in everyday items and environments. Each work, through function and metaphor, references a domestic environment or solution and acts to facilitate the viewer's conscience by contrasting the cultural opinion of the past with that of the present.

By presenting these objects within a framework that relies on the beauty of form and pattern, I am able to deliver content to a broader range of viewers. The work operates on maintaining a moment of wonder as a reaction to the complexity of techniques and individual components. That moment of wonder creates a gateway into the work from a youthful perspective present in all of us. From that perspective the viewer progresses through as many of the thematic and visual references that they can relate. This allows the viewer to experience the work from a moment of innocence that changes to a more conscientious and contemplative state. This transformation parallels the social changes we are experiencing as a society becoming more aware of how the lifestyle we have inherited can have a negative impact.

I have created works that relate to a tradition of technique within materials and re-appropriate decorative elements in a way that delivers and supports content. In the past decoration was used as a way to provide themes of pattern and color harmony. I believe that decoration provides the opportunity to add more layers of supporting information. Color and pattern can contain content, either specifically or through impression. The

impression that is created can set the stage for the viewpoint of the work on the content latent within it.

My work uses a variety of strategies to attract and engage viewers. Repetition of pattern and form is used as a means to lure the viewer into potentially controversial subject matter. A viewer that looks at my work sees the composition of elements and pattern as a whole. The viewer must engage with the work in order to separate the elements and discover the narrative and content.

By creating objects that relate to the domestic environment, I intend to make the viewer comfortable experiencing the work and exploring its content. It is the purpose of this work to present subjects of consequence through a familiar and palatable framework. The viewer is provided a personal moment where they can come to terms with their perception of the subject matter.

III. Discussion of Sources and Research

I have always been interested in understanding and observing the world around me. I grew up in the 1980's with a family of modest means, trying to work towards a better life. I watched my parents both working multiple jobs strive to earn enough money to support my two siblings and myself. During this period of time, success to a family like ours constituted things that would seem normal to us, such as: getting a raise, getting our first new car, buying a house, buying a bigger TV, and many more modern conveniences. Our family story was very common. We lived in a society that was consumer-centric.

I believe that I gravitated towards making, rather than consuming, as a form of rebellion against my perception of the world I was in. I found a certain peace in utilizing material in a way that created things that were utilitarian and necessary. Through my interest in functional works I



gained access to the greater world of craft and art. Two works, housed at the Everson Museum of Art, influenced my perception of what an object could be. “Cube Skull Teapot (Variation #6, Yixing Series)”¹ was the first work that was both functional and conceptual that

had an impact on me. The thing that shook me was how drawn I was to this potentially functional teapot because of the precise and expert treatment of material. The technique was so skilled that it forced me to look at each detail and wonder how all the things represented so clearly made sense together. The other thing that struck me about this piece was that it was a functional object. As a maker I have always been drawn to vessels. They are the consummate providers in our life in the most basic ways. We fulfil our most base necessities of survival, eating and drinking, through vessels. We ourselves become the vessel by breathing, thus becoming a vessel for air. We as a species are functional, just like that teapot. This is why I was so amazed. It had become more than a vessel to physically hold liquid, it became an abstraction of the concept. It now provided images and ideas to build a narrative for the viewer to experience.

¹ Richard Notkin, Cube Skull Teapot (variation #6, Yixing Series) 1985



The second work that I discovered at the Everson was a jar by Adelaide Aslop Robineau, titled, “Scarab Vase (The Apotheosis of the Toiler)”². This work comes in the form of a footed jar, covered by a regular and repeating pattern of dung beetles. To one person it might be a well-crafted jar with bugs on it, but to me it was a long lasting conceptual experience. The simple depiction of a scarab has roots in ancient Egypt as

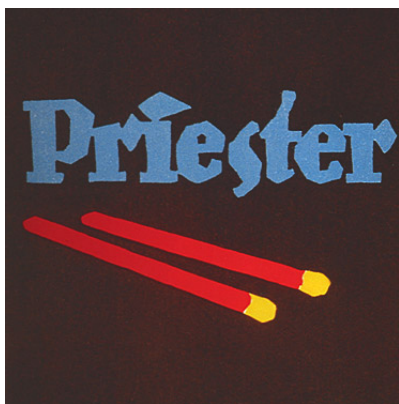
being a symbol for the cycle of life. The sophisticated organization of that symbol attracted me for long enough to delve into the meanings behind the image and the metaphors I saw in the object.

Both of these works use decoration as a means to elevate the object beyond the usefulness apparent in function. This attitude towards material and decoration has always been relevant to my work. Decoration however is not always perceived as a positive experience in contemporary art and craft. The root of this bias is apparent in “Ornament and Crime” a lecture turned essay by Adolf Loos, published in 1913. Loos likened ornament to being a disease that “represents wasted labor and ruined material.”³ He expressed a truly passionate case for how ornament is altogether a negative additive for both the integrity of the object and the economic reality of consuming it. I believe his distaste for decoration was rooted in

² Adelaide Aslop Robineau, *Scarab Vase (The Apotheosis of the Toiler)* 1910-11

³ Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime* pg. 19-24

a time when decoration was popular, but not well used. He had an appreciation for works of craft that functioned and existed in form. I liken this to appreciating the human body in form, but without recognizing the personality and mind. Each utilitarian object has form and function but it is the decoration and context that allow a narrative to be formed. That narrative is like a person's life story. To me a body is not interesting, but the person inhabiting it is. Decoration as a concept is an opportunity for a collection of symbols to become a language.



One of the reasons the “The Scarab Vase” appealed to me was the relative ease in which the symbol of the scarab was read. In 1905 a man by the name of Lucian Bernhard created a poster, advertising matches⁴. The simplicity of the design and distillation of the image created an impact that was immediate.

This helped influence a new poster genre called Sachplakat, or “object poster”. The reduction of an image or object into a symbol or icon allows for both brevity and clarity when developing a visual language. I believe that this principle can be both applied to the creation of forms and decoration.

In addition to form, and decoration, I believe that materials can become an integral portion of the content in the work I make. Each material has a form of honesty in the physical qualities it represents as well as the conceptual parallels that can be drawn through the context that you place it in. The vocabulary provided by each material is only limited by the skill with which you are capable of handling it. “Technique is

⁴ Lucian Bernhard, The Sachplakat Poster 1906

Cheap”⁵ is a famous quote by Harvey Littleton that is perpetually quoted by glassmakers. He spoke in regards to the importance of ideas and concept over technical prowess. I would agree that technical proficiency should not hinder the concept. My work is made with the belief that the technique provides clarity for material. The more adept you are at how you utilize material, the less you will need to compromise when expressing your ideas. I have utilized glass as my primary medium for over ten years to date. The things I love about the material are its ability to be rendered into forms and finishes with the effects and visual depth unattainable by any other material. I find a freedom in the material because of its endless possibilities. The only barrier to this is the skill and tenacity of the maker. Glass as a material has a reputation for beauty without content. Janet Koplos, a well known critic (also well known for her distaste with what is done with the material) described to me in a conversation that glass was too “sickly sweet”. This I think is her reaction to the material being too well liked without enough conceptual value. I considered this a reaffirmation to why I gravitate to the use of glass. I think that this quality allows the artist an opportunity to explore concepts that may not be easy to consider for the viewer. The natural beauty of glass gives you a larger margin of time for the viewer to experience the conceptual content. Koplos, in her lecture at the 2006 St. Louis GAS Conference, talked about how glass had too much concern with technique over metaphor. This is a sentiment that I would agree with, but I see this as an opportunity to provide content to alleviate the criticism.

⁵ Janet Koplos and Bruce Metcalf. *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* pg 282

IV. Critical Analysis

This body of work centers on a variety of concepts and objects that relate in form to the domestic interior. I used these objects to create a format that the average viewer had some level of comfort interacting with. This level of comfort and allure is heightened by the strategic use of decoration, form and context. A high level of craft was very important in how I made the work. I wanted each piece to have a level of integrity that would create an appreciation in the viewer for how the work was made before they reached the content latent in the piece. An example of this experience is found in the piece “On the Horizon”. When the viewer approaches the piece they see an organized collection of two-dimensional and three-dimensional clouds. The pattern they take shape in is both repeating and reminiscent of the regularity traditionally found in wallpaper. The three-dimensional clouds are made using a technical method of manipulating lines inside of glass called *zanfirico*. The lines are a collection of blues, blacks, and purples containing mirrored glass reminiscent of the light reflected off of oil. As the viewer looks at the pattern it leads their eye from left to right eventually funneling into a small smoke stack on a little building. A narrative that I imagined directly inspired the piece.

A young boy riding with his father looks out the window and sees in the distance a building with a tower pluming puffs of smoke. The father asks him what he thinks they are making in the factory in the distance. The boy thinks a moment and then completely assured of the correctness of his response says, “Don’t you see, they’re making clouds.”

This moment of innocence is how I see each viewer approaching all of the works I created for my thesis. The manipulation of the baseness of

what we are attracted to within art and craft allows for the moment I describe. I find that glass as a material allows for that moment of wonder like no other material. However, the viewer is meant to progress during the viewing process from an innocent prospective to a more mature understanding. After the wonder has worn off they begin to piece together the content created by the metaphors present within the piece. The true experience of my work is reflected in the viewer's personal history lensed through their perception of the elements in front of them.

The format of the domestic object is important due to the nature of the metaphors and context I want to create within each piece. I see the work as reflecting the costs of our most recent cultural history on the present expectations of lifestyle. Our cultural attitude is one where we feel entitled to having the right to build our home and fill it with the comforts that we are meant to be afforded. The simple idea of a light is addressed multiple times within the work. I see light as a metaphor for our modern way of life. It equates to the need, availability, and consumption of energy. The crudest example is apparent in "Finite with a Face". The work consists of a glass *reticello* white sperm whale, reminiscent of Herman Melville's "Moby Dick", suspended from a wall-mounted drilling platform while burning the oil housed within its body. *Reticello*, as a technique, is one that is often blindly sought after by technical glassmakers. It is our metaphorical "white whale". The piece is meant to be time elapsed, providing a paltry amount of light by today's standard, all the while becoming lighter and lighter as its resources are consumed. An anchor, within the contraption, cantilevers the whale. The anchor metaphorically symbolizes the end to the consumption of the resource while only touching the ground when the whale is empty. The piece is

meant to awake a conscience within the viewer and draw parallels between consumption and cost. In the past, the whale was regarded as a resource put on this planet for us to cull and use without regret. With the decline of the species our perception of it has changed. Today the whale is protected largely on a global scale. How did our perception of this resource change? As the creation and availability of light through electricity became available candles and oil lamps became inferior. Thus, the whale was effectively let off the hook.

Today we are faced with a similar energy problem. Our natural resources, used to create electricity, are being stressed while the average energy expectation of our lifestyle is increasing. I found the answer to our energy concerns within the foundation of western thinking. The Greek myth of Briareus was used as the subject for my next lighting feature. Briareus was one of the integral characters that led to the Greek gods taking control of the world from the Titans. They represent a force of nature that causes change. They are magical and mystical and win their battles because they have one-hundred hands and arms and thus can throw many stones at once. This was the irony that I wanted to instill on our next modern solution for creating light. I set about making one of these mindless beings ready to throw magical rocks at our energy crisis. It is a personal reflection of how we often give mystical answers to practical questions in our society.

The last lighting feature in the show titled “MISS (modular interior solar substitute)” comes in the form of a series of wall sconces that at first glance provide a nice amount of indirect light for the room. After being drawn in by the comfortable tone of light, the rich collection of sepias that create a sense of nostalgia, and the beauty of materials and pattern, the

viewer is jarred by a random flash in the body of the bomb. This is meant to strip the level of comfort from the viewer and allow them to see the piece for what it is. They are comprised of a general collection of bombs hitting targets, appearing to be tossed haphazardly like a dart. Though they are all at least on target, none of them have directly hit the center. They have all, in effect, missed. They are meant to be relatively generic in comparison to each other. The patterns in the bodies of the units get more and more complex with how close to center the bombs have hit. Each unit could stand-alone and be sold as a consumer lighting feature. They would however change the environment they inhabit. By randomly charging up and releasing an excess amount of light throughout the day, the lights never allow the occupant to rest or relax. This is meant to give you a mild form of “shell shock”. It creates a domesticated version of the true experience.

Each piece can be experienced on a multitude of levels, depending on who is viewing them. I see the pieces as a fragment of what they are intended to be. Like the thought experiment of Schrödinger’s Cat⁶, each work exists with the potential of many possible interpretations, waiting to exist the moment it is observed. Until the work is viewed all those possibilities exist. It is up to the viewer to determine their version of the work.

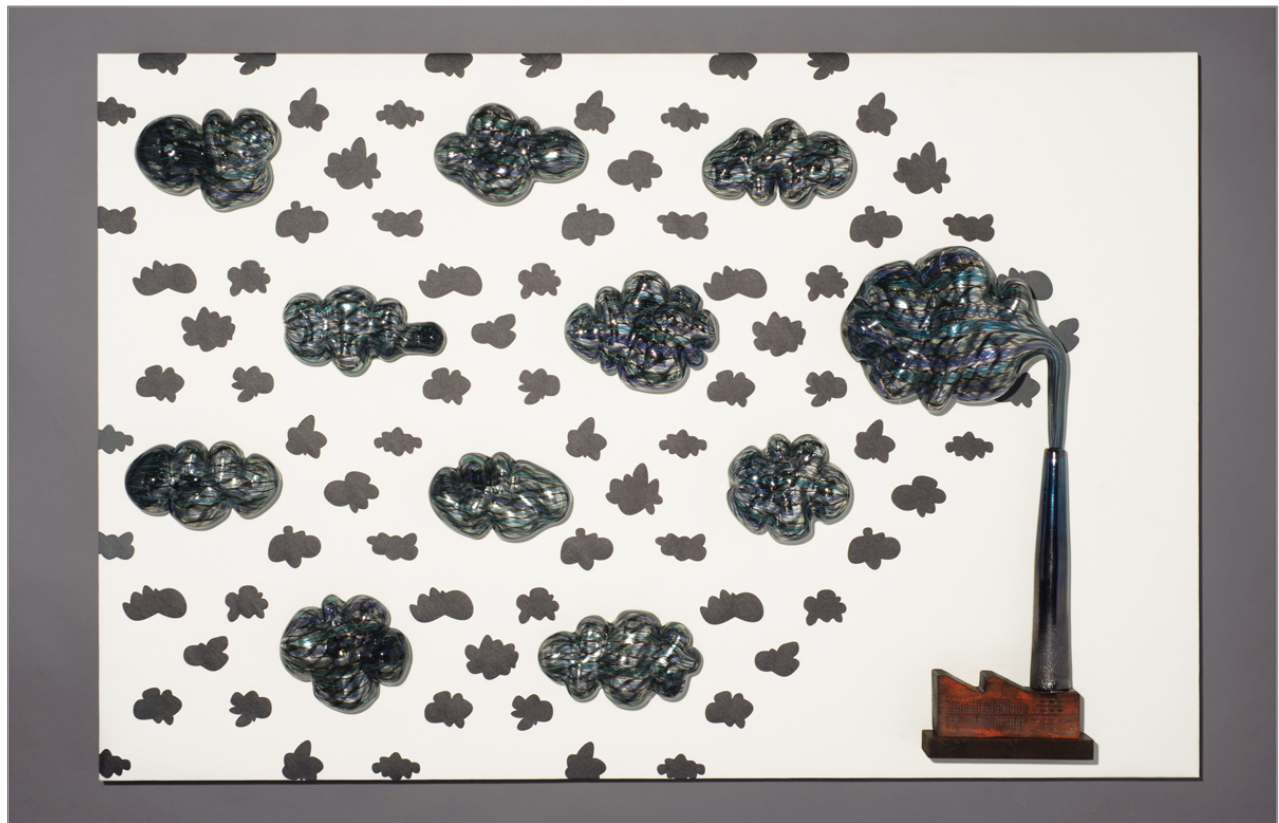
⁶ Schrödinger’s Cat is a theoretical paradox created when a cat is potentially subjected to a fatal amount of radiation inside a closed container. When explained in proof, the cat is equally likely to be either dead or alive when the box is opened. This leads to the explanation that the cat is theoretically both dead and alive until observed.

V. Conclusion

I believe that my work creates a dialogue that challenges terms such as design, craft and art. In today's art culture these terms act as barriers to how someone should create and consume works of art. I do not believe that any work of art can be made without the presence of design and craft. In my work the craft and design supports the concept through both metaphor and convention. I choose each process because I feel that it is the most appropriate and relatable to the idea I want to present. Each piece takes the form of a functional object due to the context I want to create around my concept. The ornament layered throughout each piece is meant to intrigue and impress the viewer as a means to allow them to comfortably create a personal dialogue with the work. I see myself continuing to explore and challenge the conventions of glass as a material. There is a rich history of techniques and objects that I have and will continue to appropriate into new and experimental avenues of creation.

Bibliography

1. "Richard Notkin." *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
<http://www.americanstudiocrafthistory.org>
2. Loos, Adolf (1908) *Ornament and Crime*. Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture. Ed. Ulrich Conrads. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994. 19-24
3. "Adelaide Alsop Robineau." *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
<http://www.americanstudiocrafthistory.org>
4. "The Illustrated Poster." *The Illustrated Poster*. Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
http://www.designhistory.org/Poster_pages/IIIPosters.html
5. Koplos, Janet, and Bruce Metcalf. *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2010.
6. "Glass Artists and Collectors Brace for American Studio Craft Textbook by Authors with No Love For glass." *The GLASS Quarterly Hot Sheet*. May 26, 2010, Web. 24 Jan. 2014.
<http://blog.glassquarterly.com>
7. Schrödinger, Erwin. Die gegenwärtige Situation in der Quantenmechanik, *Naturwissenschaften*. (1935). English translation: John D. Trimmer, Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 124, pp. 323-38 (1980), reprinted in *Quantum Theory and Measurement*, p. 152 (1983).



On the Horizon

32" x 48" x 6"

Glass, Wood, Digital Print



Monument for the Positive Perception of Industry

36" x 20" x 12"

Glass, Concrete, Mixed Media



Domestic Displacement

48" x 20" x 12"

Glass, Wood, Screen Printed Wall-Paper



MISS (modular interior solar substitute)

96" x 144" x 24"

Glass, Wood Veneer, Computer Controlled Lighting System



Briareus Strong, Briareus Bring Light

30" x 30" x 30"

Glass, Mixed Media



Finite with a Face

72" x 16" x 36"

Glass, Metal, Mixed Media

Thesis Committee Final Approval

Chief Advisor: Michael Rogers

Signature

Date

Associate Advisor: Robin Cass

Signature

Date

Associate Advisor: Andy Buck

Signature

Date

Chair Person: Robin Cass

Signature

Date